

## **Zambian A Cappella**

Maisie Graser

*Civic Memorial High School, Bethalto*

Teacher: Carol Phillips

America is arguably the most diverse country on the planet. In fact, the initial premise for America's establishment as a nation was based upon the concept of immigration. For centuries immigrants flocked to our borders searching for a haven that would provide relief from oppression and poverty. To this day, we are still considered to be a beacon of hope to others that lack it. It is this diversity that makes America the beautiful country that it has become. One group of immigrants that I truly believe has contributed to the cultural diversity in my area is a small group of boys from Zambia.

The small group is actually a gospel choir made up of about twelve young men. In Zambia, they all belonged to different tribes with different languages. All of them, however, sang for the choirs of their local churches. An American choir agency went to Zambia to recruit members for an African gospel choir that would tour the United States. In return for touring with the agency, the boys were to receive educations and the agency was to support their families. At the time when the agency was in Zambia, parts of the country had received little rain. It is also very common in Zambia for families to be very large. The agency's financial aid would be a tremendous blessing for each family. In May 1998, a dozen young Zambian men, none having the ability to speak English, left their families and came to America to sing African folk songs.

The Zambian A Cappella Boys toured constantly for one year with the agency, visiting forty-four states. Unfortunately, during this period of time, none of the boys received the education promised. Nor did the families receive any assistance. The agency had simply been

using the naïve boys. At the end of the year, the agency went out of business, landing the group in a prison in Dallas, Texas, that the Immigration and Naturalization Service rented. The boys were unpaid, uneducated, and alone in America. The little English that they knew was acquired simply from speaking to people. The group claims it was simply the work of God that led them to Illinois.

After living with foster families for a while, most of them now live together. Monday through Friday, they work as construction workers. However, on Sundays, they sing. Traveling to churches in the area, they sing their gospel songs. Now amazingly fluent, they tell their stories and collect donations to send back to Zambia, where over half the population is below the poverty level. Although the type of visas they were given does not allow them to visit Zambia, they spread their culture throughout this area, making it feel like home. The holidays of both countries have invoked a mutual enlightenment. For instance, when they celebrated the Zambian Independence Day, local elementary schools added African cultures to their curriculums. In addition, our custom of wearing costumes for Halloween absolutely shocked the young men. In Zambia, voodoo is taken seriously and the costumes are frightening. The sight of young children wearing diabolical costumes left them confused and frightened until it was explained.

Many immigrants come to America after leaving poverty stricken homelands and attempt to forget their previous lives and move on. However, by forgetting the past they are merely depriving the future. This wonderful group of boys has graced this area with a new knowledge and understanding of the outside world. They have embraced two cultures, still clinging to the old while adopting the new. It was immigration groups like the Zambian boys that the Statue of Liberty's inscription was calling as it reads, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

[From student historian's interview with Judi Bertels, Sept. 14, 2002; "Green Card Services," <http://www.greencard.co.uk/> (Sept. 15, 2002); Barbara Rogers, *Zambia*; student historian's interview with Samson Siame, Sept. 14, 2002.]